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from the October 2007 issue

RONNY SMITH *Simply Stated* (K&A)

Sometimes in the middle of night I wake with a start and wonder if any guitar-based contemporary instrumental music would ever have been created if George Benson, Wes Montgomery and Joe Pass had never been born. After hearing the first few seconds of Ronny Smith's "Bossa Awhile," which leads off his sparkling new CD, you'll note the influences from this troika of geniuses and know that their legacies are in good hands.

Smith is a former U.S. Army Band member interested in expanding on the good groove of the latter-day Bensons like Ronny Jordan and Norman Brown, who mix pop and jazz sounds and tempos with traces of R&B, hip-hop and even rock. Smith doesn't get as much exposure as those two, but he should. Aside from a cover of Steely Dan's "Josie," which even a guitar solo can't save from blah-ville, *Simply Stated* is a strong effort. Smith doesn't use a live drummer for the most part, but instead programs percussion and adds some interesting sounds from the controls, which only tend to heighten interest.

Highlights: "Chillin' After Eight"'s light R&B with its hand-clap groove and trumpet bursts from Gerald Chavis; the bossa chill of "Majorca"; and the romanticism of "She's So Special." On Jonathan Butler's "Fallin' in Love with Jesus," William Banks' vocals take it to the top.

—Brian Soergel

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